

# Willow Run

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Coordinates: 42°24′14.2″N 83°55′07.7″W﻿ / ﻿

The **Willow Run** manufacturing plant, located between Ypsilanti and Belleville, Michigan, was constructed during World War II by Ford Motor Company for the mass production of the B-24 Liberator military aircraft.<sup>[1]</sup>

After the war, ownership of the assembly plant passed to Kaiser Motors and then to Ford rival General Motors, which still owns and operates part of the facility as Willow Run Transmission.

→ On June 1, 2009, GM announced it would be closing the plant as part of its bankruptcy proceedings.<sup>[2][3]</sup>

The plant has given its name to a community on the east side of Ypsilanti, defined roughly by the boundaries of the Willow Run Community Schools district.

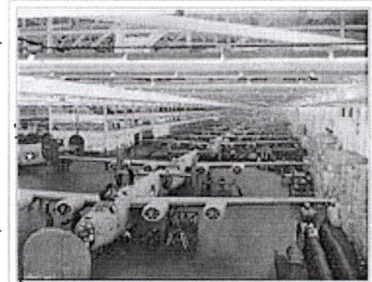
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## History

The site of the plant was a farm owned by Henry Ford. He had used the farm to provide employment for youths during the summer. Ford Motor Company, like virtually all of the United States' industrial companies, directed its manufacturing output during World War II for Allied war production. The firm developed the Willow Run site to include an airfield and aircraft assembly facility. The plant held the distinction at the time of being the world's largest enclosed "room." At its peak, in August 1944, Willow Run produced 428 B-24 aircraft, or almost 14 for each calendar day.<sup>[4]</sup>

An interesting feature of the Willow Run plant was a large turntable two-thirds of the way along the assembly line where the B-24s would make a 90° turn before continuing to final assembly. This arrangement was to avoid having the factory building cross a county line and so be taxed by two counties. The neighboring county's taxes were higher.<sup>[5]</sup>



B-24s under construction at Willow Run.



Inspection of the landing wheel of a transport plane at Willow Run



After war production ended, the plant was used by a partnership of Henry J. Kaiser and Joseph W. Frazer. They produced both Kaiser and Frazer models until 1953, when the company merged with Willys-Overland and the plant was sold to General Motors. The "Henry J" was one of the cars he produced in later years. It was also sold through Sears-Roebuck as an "Allstate". B-24s were not the only planes produced at Willow Run. From 1952 to 1953, the facility was used by Kaiser to assemble Fairchild C-119 "Flying Boxcar" cargo planes.

Sociologist and professor Lowell Juilliard Carr of the University of Michigan studied the sociological conditions arising from the wartime increase in the worker population in his landmark book on Willow Run in 1952.<sup>[6]</sup>

On the other side of the airport from the assembly plant were a group of World War II hangars, which were sold to the University of Michigan in 1946. The university operated Willow Run Laboratories (WRL) from 1946 to 1972. WRL produced many innovations, including first ruby laser and operation of the ruby maser. In 1972, demonstrations by anti-Vietnam War activists forced the university to detach WRL from it.

The airfield continues to operate as the Willow Run Airport. The airfield is primarily used for cargo flights. The Yankee Air Museum is also located on the airport grounds. On October 9, 2004, a fire destroyed the museum's main hangar, H-2041.

## Guns made at the Willow Run GM Transmission Plant

After Willow Run Bomber Plant was sold to Kaiser-Frazer who in 1953 sold it to General Motors to build transmissions, whose Livonia plant, Detroit Transmissions had burned down on August 12 1953. It took just 9 weeks for General Motors to get the new plant up and running.<sup>[7]</sup> During the Vietnam war the military contracted with General Motors Hydramatic division at Willow Run to make its new M16 rifle, and also a 20mm autocannon. Gun production was stopped in the early 70's.

## See also

- World War II aircraft production
- Yankee Air Museum
- Ypsilanti Automotive Heritage Collection

## References

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- <sup>2</sup> ^ Carey, Nick (2009-06-02). "GM restructuring claims historic Willow Run plant". Reuters. <http://www.reuters.com/article/ousiv/idUSTRE55209E20090603>. Retrieved on 2009-07-12.
- <sup>3</sup> ^ Hyde, Justin (2009-06-29). "GM says it'll close its Willow Run transmission plant". Detroit Free Press. <http://www.freep.com/article/20090629/BUSINESS01/906290370/>. Retrieved on 2009-07-12.
- <sup>4</sup> ^ Lewis, David L. "They may save our honor, our hopes—and our necks." ([http://www.michiganhistorymagazine.com/extra/willow\\_run/willow\\_run.html](http://www.michiganhistorymagazine.com/extra/willow_run/willow_run.html)) *Michigan History*, September/October 1993.
- <sup>5</sup> ^ Weber, Austin. "A Historical Perspective."



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6. ^ \* Carr, Lowell J., and Stermer, James Edison,  
*Willow Run (Work, Its Rewards and Discontents):*
7. ^ Kidder, Warren Benjamin, *Willow Run, Colossus of American Industry* Michigan:KFT,1995
- a Study of industrialization and Cultural Inadequacy*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952.  
(ISBN 978-0405101588)

## External links

- "Willow Run and the Arsenal of Democracy" (<http://info.detnews.com/history/story/index.cfm?id=73&category=locations>) by Jenny Nolan for *The Detroit News*
- Yankee Air Museum (<http://www.yankeeairmuseum.org/>)
- Michigan Aerospace Foundation (<http://www.michiganaerospace.org/>)
- A Bomber An Hour ([http://www.strategosinc.com/willow\\_run.htm](http://www.strategosinc.com/willow_run.htm))

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Categories: History of Michigan | Aviation history | Ford

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